Three of the most important policy decisions that the United States confronted in the first years of the twenty-first century were the decision to invade Iraq, the challenges of North Korea’s nuclear program and the rise of China as a world power. While there were other important questions for the United States—promoting peace between Palestinians and Israelis, relations with Iran, and managing globalization, to name a few—this chapter focuses on the former three by looking at the history of each case, the policy options that the United States had available, and the rationales for each of the main options. The rationales are necessary for an understanding of how theory and metatheory play a role in choosing a policy. The discussion of policy options in this chapter is intended to show how a reasonable policy maker who has a clear set of goals would select a policy. This is not intended to be a description of the actual policy-making process. The policy options and rationales are offered for illustration and do not exhaust all of the possibilities.

The Decision to Invade Iraq

Origins of the Iraq Problem

The United States had a complex history of security and trade relations with many Middle Eastern states throughout the twentieth century. On September 11, 2001, the United States was, of course, attacked by agents of al-Qaeda, all of whom were citizens of Middle Eastern states. Afghanistan, ruled by the Taliban, hosted al-Qaeda’s leader, Osama bin Laden, and training camps for the terrorist organization. After the attacks the United States demanded that the Taliban surrender Osama bin Laden to U.S. custody. The Taliban leader Mullah Omar refused and two months later the United States invaded Afghanistan and removed him from power. The Taliban remains active as an insurgent force but controls relatively little territory.
As 2002 arrived, the United States began pressuring Iraq to open its territory to UN weapons inspectors. Iraq's President, Saddam Hussein, had ordered invasions of both Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990. After a UN-authorized coalition led by the United States ousted Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the UN demanded that Iraq disarm in certain specified areas of weaponry under the supervision of UN inspectors. Inspections were suspended in December 1998, but in 2002 the UN began to demand that inspections be resumed.

The United States insisted that President Saddam Hussein allow UN weapons inspectors full access to suspected Iraqi weapons production and storage sites. Iraq complied with some but not all of the UN demands. President George W. Bush favored an invasion if demands were not met. However, the fact that Iraq did meet some of the demands, including allowing the return of UN weapons inspectors, complicated matters by making it harder for President Bush to persuade states that were reluctant to authorize force to go along with the United States.

While many governments around the world spoke in support of the U.S. goal of disarming Iraq, British Prime Minister Tony Blair was one of the few willing to participate in a U.S.-led invasion. Blair desired formal UN authorization for an invasion. In the autumn of 2002 the UN Security Council passed a resolution demanding that Iraq comply with prior disarmament resolutions. But the text did not specifically authorize the use of force. Most Security Council members said that they would take up the question again if Iraq did not cooperate. President Bush repeatedly argued that Iraq was not fully cooperating and repeatedly threatened to invade. Thus during the second half of 2002 and the first twelve weeks of 2003, there was an intense debate inside the United States and the UK over whether they should go to war against Iraq.

Competing Policy Options

Various political actors in the United States, the UK, and other key states endorsed several different broad lines of policy toward Iraq. The discussion that follows looks at the U.S. debate, where different people and groups argued for different courses of action. This sort of disagreement is typical in almost every state when important and potentially costly decisions are at issue. All of the parties in the U.S. debate concurred on the chief goals, which were to maximize the security of the American people and to prevent, as far as possible, more acts of terrorism against innocent civilians in the United States and around the world. But there were widely differing views about which course of action would most effectively achieve these goals. The policy proposals considered were suggested by members of the U.S. administration in Washington, DC, members of Congress, various scholars, and other prominent figures.

One option considered was for the United States and any supporting allies to launch an invasion of Iraq, irrespective of what the UN, fellow NATO member states, or other allies said. The objectives were to depose Saddam Hussein and replace him with an American-sponsored democratic government. This action